

Slovak Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh
votruba "at" pitt "dot" edu
<http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba>

Herder and Modernity: From Lesser Taught Languages to Lesser Taught Cultures

Martin Votruba

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Abstract: The typical North American curriculum of a lesser taught Slavic language implicitly relies on the legacy of Johann Gottfried von Herder's assertion that language contains national (ethnic) culture. At the same time, enrollments are dwindling even in courses in the most commonly taught Slavic languages. Post-Millennials' (Generation Z's) understandable focus on the practicality of the courses they take make it unlikely for the lesser taught languages to resist the slump. Foreign culture courses appear to hold their ground more successfully. Slavic departments may reconsider Herder's dictum as they try to maintain or establish programs in lesser taught languages and cultures.

The frequency with which a Slavic language is taught at North American universities does not go directly hand-in-hand with the number of its speakers in the country of its main use or its speakers in the world. While a small number of speakers is, understandably, a strong factor to shift the status of a language to "lesser taught," historical reasons have contributed to the current situation as well. Ukrainian is the most striking instance. In sheer number of its speakers,¹ it should be taught about as often as Polish² and be well ahead of Czech. Yet, its teaching has been affected by circumstances similar to those that have also impacted the teaching of Slovak and Slovenian, languages with but a small fraction of the speakers of Ukrainian. During the existence of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, the countries promoted Russian, Czech, and Serbo-Croatian heavily and almost exclusively as *the* languages, as well as cultures, that anyone abroad interested in the country should study. An additional, culturally awkward, argument was that the speakers of the countries' other languages learned the internationally

¹ Олександр Григорович Осауленко, ed. *Розподіл населення найбільш численних національностей за статтю та віком, шлюбним станом, мовними ознаками та рівнем освіти" входить до серії тематичних видань за даними Всеукраїнського перепису населення 2001 року*. Kyiv: Державний комітет статистики України, 2004.

² Janusz Witkowski, et al. *Wyniki Narodowego Spisu Powszechnego Ludności i Mieszkań 2011: Podstawowe informacje o sytuacji demograficzno-społecznej ludności Polski oraz zasobach mieszkaniowych*. Warsaw: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2012.

touted language at school anyway – which was actually not even true in the case of Czechoslovakia, a country like Belgium and Switzerland that never had a single official language. Both Slovak and Czech had that status, there was no interteaching of the two languages. Slovak was the language of education and administration in the Slovak federal state, Czech had that status in the Czech federal state within the two-state federation. The Slovaks and the Czechs learned to understand the other language through the country's bilingual media, which alternated the two languages conscientiously, but Slovaks and Czechs never learned to speak each other's language.

Well over a quarter century after the demise of those three multi-Slavic countries, this international legacy persists. Ukrainian, on the one hand, has over 35 million native speakers worldwide,³ which is a number that can, eventually, help it to shift away from its current position not far from the category of lesser taught Slavic languages. On the other hand, though, what might be the prospects for teaching Slavic languages that, even without their internationally suppressed status due to historical factors, are truly languages of few people and of countries with little political and military weight, not just in the world but also within the more limited confines of Europe?

The current segmentation of Slavic languages that are formally recognized as a national or regional language in at least one country is extensive (listed in descending order by the number of their self-declared or estimated speakers excluding diasporas): Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Czech, Serbian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Slovak, Belarusian, Slovene, Bosnian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Kashubian, Rusyn, Upper Sorbian, and Lower Sorbian. Based on simple numbers of speakers, the line between major and minor Slavic languages can probably be drawn between the first three and the rest. Considering the concept of "lesser taught" in the United States, Czech could probably be excluded from that category, as could the former Serbo-Croatian language, still taught at American universities as a single language but under the recently expanded label *Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian*, usually abbreviated to B/C/S or, with growing frequency, B/C/M/S (*Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian*)⁴ to save space as well as to prevent puzzlement and potential nationalist accusations that each of these now formally recognized languages is not given its due respect as a separate entity. Moving on, then, to the truly lesser taught Slavic languages (Bulgarian, Slovak, Belarusian, Slovene, Macedonian, Kashubian, Rusyn, Upper Sorbian, Lower Sorbian) – some of which would be more properly labeled "never taught" – there is little chance among the West Slavic languages that Slovak, with about a half of the speakers of Czech, could reach even half of the popularity of Czech. Among the South Slavic languages, Slovenian courses

³ "Мовний склад населення України." *Про кількість та склад населення України за підсумками Всеукраїнського перепису населення 2001 року.*

⁴ Marijeta Božović, "From YU to EU in the Language Classroom Teaching Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian in a Time of Accession." *NewsNet, News of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 5, October 2013.

would be even less likely to match the potential enrollment in what North American universities offer as a single B/C/M/S language course.

Especially in Central Europe's past, advocates of its cultures and languages would echo Johann Gottfried von Herder's idea that a nation's culture, "its complete wealth of views on tradition, history, religion, and principles of life reside in language."⁵ Without Herder necessarily being on modern faculty's minds in North American academia, that interpretation crossed the Atlantic and has survived for almost a quarter millennium. Indeed, language courses are commonly established as the core of lesser-taught language programs in Slavic departments. And given that language courses in Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, and B/C/M/S – braced by the numbers of their speakers or historical circumstances – do not often compete well with enrollments in some commonly taught non-Slavic languages, it is not unexpected that the lesser taught Slavic languages are "even-less-taught" languages or not taught at all.

Leaving the link between language and culture aside for the time being, a question certainly considered by most potential foreign language students is practicality. The Post-Millennials (Generation Z) in the home territories of the lesser taught Slavic languages now have so many years of mandatory English classes, from grade school, or middle school at the latest, through college, that North American Post-Millennials majoring in almost any field will be able to do business, carry out joint research, or have any other professional interactions with their peers in Central Europe and the Balkans without having taken any courses in their languages. With the exception of Belarusian (whose speakers are virtually guaranteed to be able to switch to Russian⁶) and Macedonia's membership pending,⁷ their speakers' majority areas are all militarily allied with the United States through their membership in NATO, which reduces the likely jobs for American speakers of their languages in defense, security, and intelligence positions to a minimum. Likewise, freelance translators from and to those languages would hardly be able to support themselves not only because of the low commissions in the U.S., but because most written translations are outsourced by North American translation agencies and individual companies to their subsidiaries or partners in the corresponding countries and areas across the Atlantic, at lower costs.⁸ All of that largely leaves North American students of the lesser taught Slavic languages unemployable should they try to find a job where their foreign language would play a central role; and should they consider moving across the Atlantic to find a job, they would have an advantage with English being their native tongue, but after four or even six years of the foreign

⁵ My translation. – Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität. Erste Sammlung*. Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1793.

⁶ "Распространение в Республике Беларусь и областях белорусского и русского языков, Таблица 5.11." *Перепись населения Республики Беларусь 2009 года*. Minsk: Белстат 2010.

⁷ "Relations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." *Topics*. NATO – OTAN, 7 April 2016. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48830.htm?selectedLocale=en#

⁸ Rachel Spilka, ed. *Digital Literacy for Technical Communication: 21st Century Theory and Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.

language in college, they would still find it difficult to compete with the locals with their native command added to 12 or more years of English starting at an early age.

The Slovak Studies Program in the Slavic Department at the University of Pittsburgh is an example of the direction of students' interests. It has consistently offered Slovak language courses at the elementary, intermediate, and advanced level. It also offers one culture course per semester, occasionally two, taught in English. Students can obtain a Minor in Slovak Studies with 15 credits accumulated through any of the courses. The university is located in Allegheny County with the historically highest percentage of people declaring Slovak ancestry of all the counties in the United States and with several nearby counties close behind.⁹ Such demographics might suggest some nostalgic interest in learning how one's ancestors spoke, perhaps to understand some of the phrases overheard from grandparents or lingering on in the neighborhood or family lexicon. Yet, although there has not been a year with no enrollment in Elementary Slovak in over a quarter century, the enrollment by Post-Millennials in the Slovak culture courses routinely beats that by a factor of four, even ten. A variety of reasons help that – each culture course has been approved by the university as meeting several curriculum requirements, they receive top ratings in anonymous evaluations, information about them is accessible on the Slovak Studies Program's website.¹⁰ But most of that is true about the language classes, too. Part of the reality is that when it comes to the study of a foreign language, practical considerations apply to students with ancestry in a lesser taught culture and language as much as to any other student. The other part of the reality is that past attempts to rely on Americans' ancestry are unlikely to work with the lesser taught Slavic languages in the 21st century. Such pockets of specific ethnic groups of European-Americans, established during the massive immigration before World War I, have been substantially diluted by now, four to six generations later. For instance, the 2010 U.S. Census estimated that 300 people with Slovak ancestry in Allegheny County speak Spanish at home and another 50 an Asian language.¹¹ The personal histories of the students who enroll in Slovak courses reflect that as well. As many as a third of students in the language classes have no Slovak ancestry, registering for a wide range of reasons. Even more strikingly, but a fraction of the students in the culture courses are aware of any Slovak ancestry. They register because they are interested in the topic, because of course evaluations by other students, or because they need to meet a university requirement and they decided that an aspect of the given course met what they were ready to invest in fulfilling it.

This brings back Herder, on the one hand, and the goals of the North American Slavic departments, on the other hand, with their programs of lesser taught languages. Herder was obviously right with the truism that culture largely resides in language in the sense that a large part of

⁹ "Table DP-2: Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000." Geographic Areas. *United States Census 2000*. Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau, 2001.

¹⁰ "Slovak Studies Program." *University of Pittsburgh*. <http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/skprogram/skprogram.html>

¹¹ "Table B04006. People Reporting Ancestry. Universe: Total population." *2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*. Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau, 2011.

what happens in a culture and society is conveyed by the language spoken among its members. But quaint idioms and grammatical structures notwithstanding, a culture, its social rules, and history do not rest in what language a student can acquire in two, or even more, semesters. A student who has taken two to four semesters of a lesser taught Slavic language may not be easy to compare to a student who has taken two to four semesters of English-taught courses in, say, that culture's history, film, immigration to the U.S., and literature in translation, but given that the student of language will still likely need to use English for a more sophisticated discussion with a peer from the lesser taught language-cum-culture, it is likely that the one with credits for four culture courses will turn out to be more culturally aware than the one who took language courses. And considering how much faster linguistic performance fades by comparison to knowledge, that cultural awareness is likely to have staying power for more years.

When North American Slavic departments address their human resource allocation mandates, they may consider the broader potential impact from offering "lesser-taught culture" courses compared to lesser-taught language courses. With the dwindling, sometimes minuscule or non-existent, enrollments in Bulgarian, Slovak, Belarusian, Slovene, and Macedonian language courses (and hardly any in Kashubian, Rusyn, Upper Sorbian, and Lower Sorbian), a minor Slavic culture could perhaps be an established, permanent program in a Slavic department with several English-taught culture courses offered each semester and no language at all. Herder's idea that a nation's culture, "views on tradition, history, religion, and principles of life reside in language," contains the possibility that it does not actually *rest* in an English speaker's ephemeral contest with fast-flowing linguistic genders, cases, and aspects, but that at least parts of a nation's culture can be successfully *conveyed* in language, in the English language, to North American students with long-term results.